Smart People Don't Chase Goals; They Create Limits

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A few years ago, I sat across from a friend at a late dinner. He was telling me about his new promotion, the big title, the bonus, the corner office. I remember watching his face as he described it. He looked like someone describing a story he'd once believed but no longer knew how to finish.

Later that night, walking home alone, I realized I had spent the last year of my life pursuing a goal I barely remembered choosing. I had grown proficient at producing, scaling, optimizing. I had systems. I had habits. But I was working in the absence of inner alignment. I was winning at a game I no longer wanted to play.

The goal hadn't been wrong. It had just been handed to me, implicitly, by a world that measures progress in forward motion and not in depth.

That was the moment I began to question the entire architecture of ambition. Not whether it worked, but whether it asked the right things of a person. Whether a life could be constructed from milestones rather than methods, from outcomes rather than orientation.

Lately, I've paid closer attention to the boundaries that shape my work. The negative space. The rules. The constraints. I stopped asking where I wanted to go and started asking what I was unwilling to violate in order to get there. I noticed a shift: The work got harder, yes. But also clearer.

I haven't abandoned goals entirely. But I no longer treat them as sacred. They're furniture. Constraints are the frame.

The Overrated Religion of Goals

In 1953, a popular myth claimed that Yale graduates who wrote down their goals were significantly more successful 20 years later than those who didn't. The study was cited in self-help books, business seminars, and motivational speeches for decades. The only problem was that the study never happened. It was completely fabricated, a ghost statistic that wandered the halls of corporate training programs like a benevolent poltergeist. But it persisted. Like a bad penny, it kept showing up for decades.

Why?

Because it said what people wanted to believe: that clarity of ambition would bring control, that intention would yield destiny.

The cult of goal-setting thrives in this illusion. It converts uncertainty into an illusion of progress. It demands specificity in exchange for comfort. And it replaces self-trust with the performance of future-planning. That makes it wildly appealing to organizations, executives, and knowledge workers who want to feel like they're doing something without doing anything unpredictable. But the more interesting question is: who is *not* setting goals? And why?

It turns out that many of the people doing genuinely innovative work avoid explicit goals entirely. They work within constraints instead.

Goals are for Games. Constraints are for Worlds.

A goal is a win condition. Constraints are the rules of the game. But not all games are worth playing. And some of the most powerful forms of progress emerge from people who stopped trying to win and started building new game boards entirely.

When John Boyd, the brilliant / irascible military strategist, developed the OODA loop, he worked within the limits of jet fighter dogfights. In those constraints, he found a dynamic model of decision-making that would later influence military doctrine, business strategy and start-up culture.

Richard Feynman didn’t get his Nobel Prize by pursuing "win a Nobel Prize" as a goal. He played with problems, often placing arbitrary limits on himself: what if we assume this system has no dissipation? What if we ignore spin? He looked for elegance within boundaries, not outcomes. His freedom came from self-imposed structure.

Constraints do not block creativity. They aim it. The sonnet form is maddeningly restrictive. Yet Shakespeare produced infinite meaning inside 14 lines. Jazz musicians work within a key and tempo. Architects must respect the load-bearing capacity of concrete. The painter who begins with a blank canvas faces more paralysis than the one who starts with a frame and a palette.

The Seduction of Goals

Setting goals feels like action. It gives you the warm sense of progress without the discomfort of change. You can spend hours calibrating, optimizing, refining your goals. You can build a Notion dashboard. You can make a spreadsheet. You can go on a dopamine-fueled productivity binge and still never do anything meaningful.

Because goals are often surrogates for clarity. We set goals when we’re uncertain about what we really want. The goal becomes a placeholder. It acts as a proxy for direction, not a result of it.

In WWII, when allied bombers returned to base riddled with bullet holes, engineers initially proposed reinforcing the areas with the most damage. But statistician Abraham Wald pointed out the flaw: they were only seeing the planes that made it back. The holes marked the *survivable* areas. The real vulnerabilities were the untouched parts on the returning planes, because the ones hit there never came home.

Goals often focus our attention on the visible holes. But it’s the invisible constraints that tell us what really matters.

Constraints as Compass

NASA had a fixed budget, fixed timeline, and a goal that bordered on the absurd: land a man on the moon before the decade was out. But what made it possible wasn’t the moonshot goal. It was the sheer range of constraints: weight, heat, vacuum, radio delay, computation. Each constraint forced creative workarounds. Slide rules and paper simulations gave us one of the most improbable technological feats in history.

Constraints make solutions non-obvious. They force the kind of second-order thinking that goals actively discourage. Instead of aiming for a finish line, the constrained mind seeks viability. It doesn’t ask, “How do I get there?” It asks, “What’s possible from here?”

Why Constraints Scale and Goals Break

A goal set at time T is a bet on the future from a position of ignorance. The more volatile the domain, the more brittle that bet becomes.

This is where smart people get stuck. The brighter you are, the more coherent your plans tend to look on paper. But plans are scripts. And reality is improvisation.

Constraints scale better because they don't assume knowledge. They are adaptive. They respond to feedback. A small team that decides, "We will not hire until we have product-market fit" has created a constraint that guides decisions without locking in a prediction. A founder who says, "I will only build products I can explain to a teenager in 60 seconds" is using a constraint as a filtering mechanism.

The Psychology of Anti-Goals

There's a kind of internal rebellion that occurs when you set a goal you don't believe in. You drag your heels. You sabotage yourself. You procrastinate, but not because you're lazy. Because you're not aligned.

Anti-goals are constraints disguised as aversions. The entrepreneur who says, "I never want to work with clients who drain me" is sketching a boundary around their time, energy, and identity. It's not a goal. It's a refusal. And refusals shape lives just as powerfully as ambitions.

Marcus Aurelius, writing in his private journal that we now call *Meditations*, returned constantly to the idea of limits. He didn't prescribe grand goals. He reminded himself what *not* to do: Don't lie. Don't whine. Don't be ruled by impulse. The Stoic path is constraint-oriented. It avoids the seduction of outcomes.

The Career of the Constraint-Seeker

One person sets a goal: become a best-selling author. Another imposes a constraint: write every day, but never write what bores me. The first may spend years pitching, networking, contorting themselves into marketable shapes. The second may accidentally build a following simply because the work sustains itself.

The historian Fernand Braudel once wrote that time flows on multiple levels: the rapid time of events, the slow time of structures, the almost imperceptible time of geography. Constraints operate on the second level - they shape how you move through the world over years and decades. Not by pointing to a specific outcome, but by removing paths that would corrupt, dilute, or distract you.

When to Use Goals

There are times when goals make sense. Training for a marathon. Preparing for an exam. Trying to ship a product by a hard deadline. In finite, controlled, well-understood domains, goals are fine.

But smart people often face ambiguous, ill-defined problems. Should I switch careers? Start a company? Move cities? Build a media business? In those spaces, setting a goal is like mapping a jungle with a Sharpie. Constraints are the machete.

If you're building a path through the unknown, it's better to say:

- I won't take money from people I don't trust.
- I won't build things I wouldn't use.
- I won't work in teams where I have to wear a mask.

These are not goals. But they will get you further than most goals ever will.

Closing the Loop

John Boyd, again. In his famous decision fork, he posed a career-defining question: Do you want to be someone, or do you want to do something?

Goals often come from the first desire. Constraints come from the second.

One is about image. The other is about identity.

And the latter has more room to grow.